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Rideau Centre closes after maskless protesters are seen confronting staff

Many protesters were seen entering the mall to eat, use washrooms and escape the frigid temperatures.

Marco Vigliotti, Matthew Lapierre

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Unmasked protestors were inside the Rideau Centre shopping centre on Saturday. The mall was closed in late afternoon. PHOTO BY ERROL MCGIHON /Postmedia

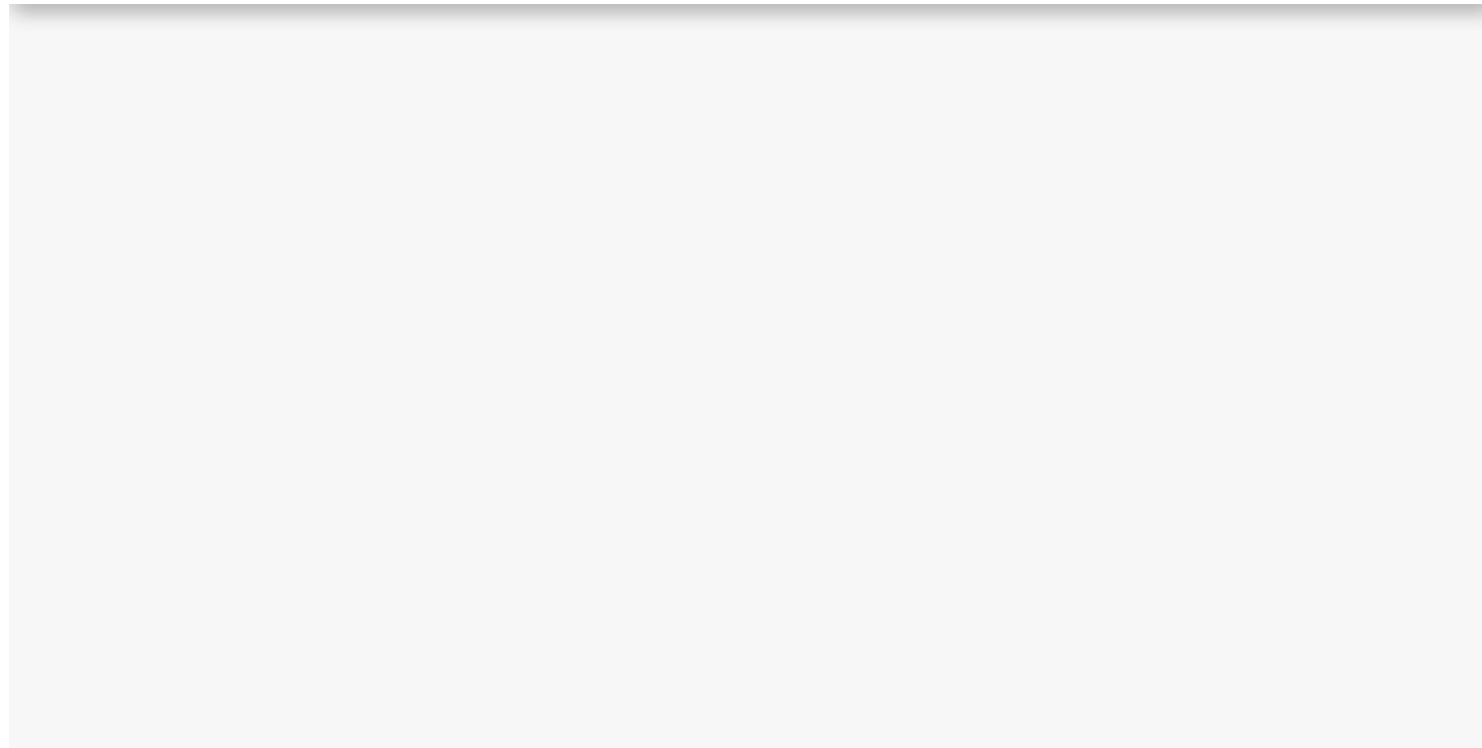
The Rideau Centre closed to the public Saturday afternoon after maskless protesters were seen confronting employees who wore masks, and eating and drinking throughout the facility in defiance of public health orders.

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There was no word immediately on whether the mall would reopen on Sunday.



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“The safety of our guests, tenants and employees is our priority,” the statement read.

Security staff began closing the mall and ushering people outside just before 3 p.m. as Freedom Convoy protests continued to swell in nearby streets. Many protesters were seen entering the mall to eat, use washrooms and escape the frigid temperatures.

Though many of the protesters who sat on the ground and waited in line for the bathroom appeared sullen and tired, cries of “freedom” and chants using an expletive to refer to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau were quickly taken up by the crowd. They echoed through the mall.

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“You’re free now,” one maskless man told a worker who sat at a booth. “You don’t have to wear that.”

By early afternoon, security guards had long since given up trying to get the protesters to wear masks.

“There are so many people and they are very aggressive,” one security guard said.

Rayene Bimbachi, 22, works at the mall and said a Rideau Centre employee was “shaking and crying” as she told her the mall was shutting down due to the crowds.

She said protesters had been getting in confrontations with mall staff all day and she had been questioned multiple times about why she was wearing a mask. As her store closed, she said two women told her she was only closing out of fear of the protesters.

After closing, she said she ran out of the mall to avoid any further interactions with protesters.

“I tried to just keep my head down. It was the scariest thing I’ve ever seen in the mall and I’ve worked there for four years,” Bimbachi said.

The protesters could be heard chanting against the federal government and Trudeau throughout the day, she said, with some even protesters smoking inside the mall in violation of regulations.



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